

EMPOWERING MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES THROUGH TOURISM: THE CASE OF POLONNARUWA UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE CITY

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ABSTRACT

The ancient city of Polonnaruwa, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, offers immense potential for tourism-driven empowerment of marginalized communities. Despite its rich historical and cultural heritage, the surrounding rural communities, including women, youth, and individuals with disabilities, continue to face socioeconomic challenges. This study investigates how tourism can be utilized as a tool to empower marginalized groups, thereby improving their quality of life and fostering inclusive growth. Although the city attracts a steady influx of tourists, local communities often remain excluded from the benefits of economic barriers, limited skills, and a lack of awareness. A qualitative case study approach was employed to gather data through in-depth interviews and observations from key stakeholders such as community members, local tourism operators, and government officials. Twenty-two respondents were selected to represent marginalized groups. Content analysis was used to identify recurring patterns in the data. The findings reveal that marginalized communities in Polonnaruwa face significant barriers, including high unemployment, low-income levels, and limited access to education and training. However, tourism offers promising opportunities for economic empowerment through employment in tourism-related services, community-based tourism initiatives, and preservation of cultural heritage. The involvement of women and youth in tourism activities has demonstrated the potential to enhance their socioeconomic status and promote community development. This study underscores the need for targeted interventions by both the government and private sectors to create an enabling environment for marginalized communities to actively participate in tourism. Recommendations include capacity building, infrastructure development, and increased awareness of the benefits of tourism. If these issues are addressed, tourism can serve as a catalyst for the socio-economic development and empowerment of marginalized groups in Polonnaruwa.

Keywords: Case study, empowerment, marginalized communities, Polonnaruwa, tourism